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Abstract

This study examined how practitioners who provide sport psychology support use counselling principles and skills to develop practitioner-athlete relationships. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirteen competent practitioners (Mean age = 41.2 ± 10.9 years old, five men, eight women). Thematic analysis revealed that the participants used a range of counselling principles to develop practitioner-athlete relationships including: the facilitative conditions, self-disclosure, counselling skills, the formation of *working alliances*, and awareness of the *unreal relationship*. The participants also described using non-counselling strategies (e.g., gaining an understanding of the athlete's sporting environment) to build relationships with their athletes. There was considerable variation between the participants both in the training that they had received in counselling principles and skills, and how they applied them. It was concluded that counselling principles and skills play a significant role in the development of practitioner-athlete relationships.

Key words: Professional Practice, Relationships, Counselling

The Use of Counselling Principles and Skills to Develop Practitioner-Athlete

Relationships by Practitioners Who provide Sport Psychology Support

Extensive research within sport psychology provides guidance on what sport psychologists should deliver within consultations (e.g., psychological skills training) but less exists on how to form and maintain successful practitioner-athlete relationships (Katz & Hemmings, 2009; Sharp & Hodge, 2011). This is a concern given that athletes identify interpersonal skills and the ability to build practitioner-athlete relationships as central characteristics of effective sport psychologists (Anderson, Miles, Robinson, & Mahoney, 2004; Lubker, Visek, Geer, & Watson II, 2008; Sharp & Hodge, 2014). Moreover, it has been suggested that sound practitioner-athlete relationships are likely to lead to greater athlete disclosure (Katz & Hemmings, 2009) and adherence to the practice and use of psychological techniques (Petitpas, Giges, & Danish, 1999; Sharp & Hodge, 2011). Research indicates that effective practitioner-athlete relationships are partnerships that positively impact upon clients' performance and well-being, and are characterised by trust, rapport and respect (Sharp, Hodge, & Danish, in press). However, neophyte sport psychologists have been found to worry about how to form such relationships with their athletes (Cropley, Miles, Hanton, & Niven, 2007; Woodcock, Richards, & Mugford, 2008).

Unlike sport psychology, extensive research has examined the formation of successful counsellor-client relationships in counselling with this aspect of practice deemed important to the therapeutic outcome (Horvath, Del Re, Flückiger, & Symonds, 2011; Sexton & Whiston, 1994). It has been theorised that counsellor-client relationships comprise three components (the *unreal relationship*, the *working alliance* and the *real relationship*) although the emphasis placed on them may vary depending on the style of counselling adopted (Gelso & Carter, 1985; Sexton & Whiston, 1994). This theoretical approach to the counsellor-client relationship has provided the foundation for much of the research on this aspect of practice.

Over the past two decades there have been increasing calls for sport psychologists to consider the three components of the counsellor-client relationship in the development of the relationships with their athletes (Andersen & Speed, 2010; Katz & Hemmings, 2009; Petitpas et al., 1999). However, only a handful of researchers have provided insight into how sport psychologists make use of them (Cropley et al., 2007; Sharp & Hodge, 2011; Winstone & Gervis, 2006). Further evaluation is therefore needed so that appropriate training in relationship-development can be put in place for neophyte practitioners.

The *working alliance* component of the counsellor-client relationship pertains to the working agreement between the client and counsellor on the goals, tasks and emotional bond that they share (Bordin, 1979). The quality of the *working alliance* impacts upon how successful therapy is with suggestions that it makes clients less likely to withdraw from therapy and fosters a space where different approaches to working with the client can be adopted (Horvath et al., 2011). Sport psychologists, like counsellors, acknowledge the importance of developing effective working relationships with their athletes (Cropley et al., 2007; Tod & Anderson, 2005). Findings from an interview-based study conducted in New Zealand which examined sport psychologists' perceptions of effective consulting relationships revealed that they emphasised robust, balanced and collaborative relationships with their athletes (Sharp & Hodge, 2011). Moreover, the practitioners reported a progression in their working relationships over the course of the consultancy with the sport psychologist likely to lead in the initial educational phase and the athlete taking increased ownership during the latter stages. Petitpas and colleagues (1999) postulated that a shared responsibility between practitioners and athletes for the formulation of goals, tasks and their emotional bond may increase athlete adherence to psychological programmes. However, further research is required to examine how sport psychologists develop *working alliances* with their athletes in order to provide guidance for neophyte practitioners.

The *unreal relationship* is a psychodynamic concept and comprises client transference (how clients feel about, and behave with, their counsellors as a result of past interactions with others; Sexton & Whiston, 1994; Strean & Strean, 1998) and practitioner countertransference (the client evokes strong feelings, either positive or negative, in the practitioner; Winstone & Gervis, 2006). Psychodynamic counsellors argue that client-transference towards the counsellor is central to the development of a working relationship because it enables clients to identify and work through issues associated with past relationships (Andersen & Speed, 2010). Sharp and Hodge (2011) recently found that sport psychologists varied in their perceptions of athlete-transference. Some practitioners felt that athlete-transference accelerated the practitioner-athlete relationship while others believed that it could lead to a power imbalance in favour of the practitioner, which could result in athletes being less willing to divulge information. Regardless of these perceptions it has been argued that a lack of practitioner-awareness of both transference and countertransference can be detrimental to the consultancy process (Strean & Strean, 1998). More specifically, Stevens and Andersen (2007) discussed the role that transference and countertransference can play in the development of unethical erotic or sexual attractions between practitioners and athletes. Supervision and personal counselling have been recommended as a means through which to raise practitioner-awareness of countertransference (Winstone & Gervis, 2006). However, sport psychologists have been found to vary in the nature, frequency and amount of supervision that they have (Sharp & Hodge, 2011). Additionally, a quantitative study found that only one sport psychologist out of 58 reported using personal counselling despite them deeming self-awareness to be important (Winstone & Gervis, 2006). Further research is needed to determine if and why practitioners neglect this aspect of practice so that appropriate training can be devised.

The *real relationship* is the final component of the counsellor-client relationship and is defined as, “the personal relationship existing between two or more people as reflected in the degree to which each is genuine with the other, and perceives and experiences the other in ways that befit the other” (p. 6). Research indicates that the formation of genuine relationships which are based upon reality can strengthen practitioner-client *working alliances* and reduce client transference (Marmarosh et al., 2009). The sport psychology literature on the *real relationship* has focussed on sport psychologists’ use of the facilitative conditions (Andersen & Speed, 2010; Katz & Hemmings, 2009) and appropriate self-disclosure (Petitpas et al., 1999).

The facilitative conditions, founded within the humanistic approach to counselling, are those that enable clients to grow and develop and include: the counsellor being genuine within the relationship (congruent), holding the client in unconditional positive regard, being empathetic to the client’s situation and demonstrating warmth (Rogers, 1957). Watson (2007) asserted that although the facilitative conditions may not be enough in themselves to promote client change they enhance the interaction between the practitioner and client. Furthermore, it has been argued that the facilitative conditions encourage real, open and genuine relationships where clients feel listened to and understood and as a consequence, more likely to be to be invigorated to reach their goal (Petitpas et al., 1999). Both sport psychologists (Cropley et al., 2007; Sharp & Hodge, 2011) and athletes (Anderson et al., 2004) have emphasised the importance of the facilitative conditions in the development of practitioner-athlete relationships. Katz and Hemmings (2009) and Murphy and Murphy (2010) have encouraged sport psychologists to use active listening skills (a unique form of listening which happens when sport psychologists encourage their athletes to “tell their story” and they hear what they are saying both factually and emotionally) to foster caring and genuine relationships. Active listening is enhanced through the use of summarising, paraphrasing,

reflecting and gaining clarification where necessary (Katz & Hemmings, 2009). While there is intuitive appeal in the use of the facilitative conditions and active listening to develop sport psychologist-athlete relationships, there is limited understanding of how practitioners make use of them or how they develop these skills.

Practitioner self-disclosure can also be used to foster *real relationships*. Research within counselling has revealed that counsellor self-disclosure can lead to increased client-disclosure particularly if the disclosures are similar (Henretty, Currier, Berman, & Levitt, 2014). Research into use of self-disclosure by sport psychologists is limited, although the sharing of sporting experiences is seen as crucial to the development of practitioner-athlete relationships (Cropley et al., 2007) as practitioners can empathise with the situations within which athletes may find themselves (Sharp & Hodge, 2011). In spite of these initial insights, further research is needed to examine sport psychologists' use of self-disclosure as Petitpas and colleagues (1999) argued that sport psychologist self-disclosure must be for the benefit of the athlete and must not detract from their needs.

Owing to the potential benefits that the use of counselling principles and skills may have on the development of sport psychologist-athlete relationships, several training strategies have been proposed to develop this aspect of sport psychologists' practice. These include: engaging in role plays, being the client, recording supervision models, keeping training logs, having personal counselling, and engaging in trainee-supervisor relationships and networks (Katz & Hemmings, 2009; Petitpas et al., 1999; Tod, 2010; Winstone & Gervis, 2006). Despite sport psychologists acknowledging the importance of undertaking training in counselling (Cropley et al., 2007; Murphy & Murphy, 2010; Sharp & Hodge, 2011) no research has been undertaken to examine their perceptions of, or engagement with, this training. This is of concern as current training methods on this aspect of practice may not be fit for purpose.

In 1999 Petitpas and colleagues proposed how sport psychologists could apply principles of counselling to aid the development of sport psychologist-athlete relationships. Other researchers have since presented similar arguments (Andersen & Speed, 2010; Katz & Hemmings, 2009; Murphy & Murphy, 2010), yet only limited research has been undertaken to examine if and how sport psychologists make use of them (Sharp & Hodge, 2011; Winstone & Gervis, 2006). This avenue of research warrants further examination as the demands placed on sport psychologists and the environments within which they work differ to counsellors. For example, unlike counsellors, sport psychologists will often find themselves socialising with athletes (e.g., at competitions) and may also be required to form relationships with other support staff (e.g., coaches; Katz & Hemmings, 2009). These factors may impact upon their use of counselling principles and skills and the nature of the relationships that they share with their athletes. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the use of counselling principles and skills by practitioners who provide sport psychology support, to enhance practitioner-athlete relationships. More specifically, the study examined: practitioners' development and training in counselling, practitioners' perceptions of the importance of practitioner-athlete relationships and practitioners' use of counselling principles and skills to develop of practitioner-athlete relationships.

Method

Participants

Thirteen participants (Mean age = 41.2 ± 10.9 years old; five men, eight women; Mean number of years practicing = 13.0 ± 8.2 (inclusive of training), range = 3-29 years) who were competent in providing sport psychology support to athletes in the United Kingdom were recruited. A broad sample (e.g., ages, experiences and training) was recruited to capture the range of ways in which counselling principles and skills may be used to develop practitioner-athlete relationships. More specifically, professionally active

practitioners who were either accredited (by the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences: BASES) Sport and Exercise Scientists (Sport Psychology) or Chartered (by the British Psychological Society; BPS) Psychologists and registered Sport and Exercise Psychologists with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) were invited to take part in the study (Cotterill, 2011). Additionally, one participant who was working for a professional sports team and had completed all of their training hours with the BPS over three years but was awaiting their final portfolio submission and viva was recruited. This participant has since fully qualified as a Sport and Exercise Psychologist. Eleven of the participants were purposively sampled via first and second author networks and a further two participants were recruited via snowball sampling.

Procedure

Upon gaining ethical approval from the University Ethics Committee, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all of the participants to examine their use of counselling principles and skills to aid the development of practitioner-athlete relationships. Qualitative interviews were conducted as they enable understanding of the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of phenomenon (Gratton & Jones, 2010), which directly aligned to the aims of this study. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken as they provided the interviewer with a general list of questions but allowed for deviation should they deem it necessary (Gratton & Jones, 2010). In order to assess the appropriateness of the interview guide, it was reviewed by the second author who aligned to the participant selection criteria. Subsequent amendments were made to the ordering of some of the questions.

For consistency all interviews were conducted by the first author who had extensive experience in conducting research interviews. Additionally, the first author had attended an Introduction to Counselling Course in the year prior to the study taking place which enhanced their understanding of counselling terminology. Choice in interview times and locations was

196 offered to all participants to make them feel comfortable as this is central to effective
197 interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Before beginning the interview, all participants were
198 informed about the purpose of the study and asked to provide informed consent. Their
199 permission was also sought to record the interviews. For consistency, a definition of
200 counselling was provided at the start of each interview to aid participant understanding:

201 A professional relationship between a trained counsellor and client... It is designed to
202 help clients understand and clarify their views of their lifespace, and to learn to reach
203 their self-determined goals through meaningful, well-informed choices and through
204 the resolution of problems of an emotional or personal nature (Burks & Stefflre, 1979,
205 p.14 cited in McLeod, 1994, p. 1).

206 The same semi-structured interview guide was used with all of the participants and was based
207 upon recommendations made by both Petitpas and colleagues (1999) and Katz and
208 Hemmings (2009) for how sport psychologists could make use of counselling principles and
209 skills to develop practitioner-athlete relationships. The interview guide consisted of six
210 sections which were aligned to the aims of the study including: participants' background
211 information and their development and training in counselling, the importance that they
212 placed on the practitioner-athlete relationship, if and how they applied the three components
213 of counsellor-client relationship to their sport psychology consultancy (working alliance, the
214 *real relationship*, awareness of the *unreal relationship*) to enhance practitioner-client
215 relationships, their confidence in using these methods and perceptions of the
216 training/supervision that they had received and finally, the consequences of the use of
217 counselling principles and skills. Probes and follow up questions were used when more
218 information was wanted from a participant (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Interviews lasted an
219 average of 57 minutes (range = 38-91 minutes).

220

221 Data analysis

222 All interviews were transcribed verbatim and read several times by the lead author to
223 increase their familiarity with the data. Upon completion of this process two phases of
224 thematic analysis were undertaken by the lead author to identify common categories from the
225 data (Weber, 1990) whilst also acknowledging rare participant experiences as these are
226 equally insightful (Krane, Andersen, & Streaan, 1997). Data were firstly deductively analysed.
227 Deductive analysis involves the use of pre-existing categories to collate and categorise
228 interview data (Patton, 2002). This phase of analysis was shaped by the three aims of the
229 study which were to determine practitioners' development and training in counselling,
230 practitioners' perceptions of the importance of practitioner-athlete relationships and
231 practitioners' use of counselling principles and skills to develop of practitioner-athlete
232 relationships. The deductive approach seemed appropriate given the counselling relationship
233 theory on which the interviews were based (e.g., the *working alliance*, the *unreal*
234 *relationship*, the *real relationship* and counselling skills).

235 Upon completion of the deductive analysis a second phase of inductive analysis was
236 undertaken. Inductive analysis was undertaken to categorise interview data that did not fit
237 into the existing categories (Patton, 2002). As a result of this process two further sections of
238 analysis were undertaken: challenges to the development of practitioner-athlete relationships
239 and the use of counselling skills, and practitioners' use of non-counselling strategies to build
240 practitioner-athlete relationships. Throughout both phases of analysis tags were used to
241 categorise similar extracts of interview data (Côte, Salmela, Baria, & Russell, 1993).

242 Trustworthiness and accuracy of the data

243 Several methods were adopted to ensure the trustworthiness and accuracy of the data.
244 Participant quotes (Sparkes, 1998) and negative cases which demonstrated contradictory
245 information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were presented in the results to allow readers to assess

the accuracy of the conclusions. Furthermore, once the first author had analysed the data the second author assessed the accuracy with which the participants' viewpoints and experiences had been represented to further corroborate the validity of the analysis process. The transferability of the data was ensured by providing a thorough description of the participants and methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, the same interviewer and interview guide was used with all participants for consistency.

Results

In accordance with the aims of the study and the analysis process the results comprise five sections: practitioners' development and training in counselling/counselling skills, the importance of the practitioner-athlete relationship, how practitioners' use counselling principles and skills to develop practitioner-athlete relationships, challenges to the development of practitioner-athlete relationships and the use of counselling skills, and finally practitioners' use of non-counselling strategies used to develop practitioner-athlete relationships. Within each section the categories (and where relevant sub-categories) that emerged as a result of the analysis procedure are discussed. Furthermore, owing to the large volume of data that was generated figures are presented within three sections to illustrate additional detail that emerged as a result of the coding process. Two sections (Importance of the practitioner-athlete relationship and challenges to the use of counselling principles and skills and relationship development) do not make use of figures as the participants discussed only a limited number of concepts.

Practitioners' development and training in counselling/ counselling skills

Figure one provides descriptive information on the four categories that comprise the participants' development and training in counselling/skills (reasons why training was undertaken, type of training undertaken, content of training and methods used to equip practitioners with counselling skills). There was considerable variation between the

participants in their training/development in counselling. The most widely reported mode of training undertaken was a certificate in counselling course, lasting up to 10 weeks, which covered a range of theoretical counselling approaches and equipped the participants with basic counselling skills (e.g., active listening) through methods including role plays.

FIGURE 1

The reasons for the participants seeking training in counselling were varied. Participant eight said, “I wanted to upskill myself in counselling techniques to help those one-to-ones and I suppose it counts towards my BPS (training) as well ... they (the BPS) don’t specify what you need to do for CPD but it does count towards it.” Although many of the participants reported being confident in the use of counselling skills participant two was keen to reiterate that they were, “not a counsellor” but used counselling skills.

It is important to acknowledge that although many of the participants had undertaken some form of training or development in counselling (even if this involved only reading counselling literature) participant six felt negatively about counselling and had done no training in it:

The bad stereotype of counselling I think I’d want to avoid quite strongly, the sort of being too empathetic or listening too much because athletes sort of just want a normal chat with someone. They don’t want to think in this situation that they’re having a counselling session ... I suppose maybe I haven’t got the right view of counselling. There were suggestions that there should be more training for UK trainees in counselling skills (e.g., attendance on a short counselling course). Participant 10 also argued that trainees should engage in personal counselling to develop understanding of what it is like to, “Walk a mile in their (the athlete) shoes and see what it’s like.”

The importance of practitioner-athlete relationships

All of the participants emphasised the importance of practitioner-athlete relationships stating that they could not practice effectively without them. However, participant 13 argued that the relationships did not have to be based on a mutual liking of one another stating, “Particularly at elite performance level it (liking one another) isn’t essential. Nonetheless there needs to be some kind of relating in order for that some kind of usefulness is gained on both sides and particularly for the client/athlete.”

Explanations for the importance of practitioner-athlete relationships included that they enhanced athlete disclosure and willingness to talk. There was a perception that an increased willingness to talk enabled the practitioner to gain greater understanding of the athlete, which allowed them to cater for their needs better. Participant 12 stated, “I think if you haven’t got that good relationship I don’t think people will tell you things ... what you discuss will be very superficial and you won’t get to the bottom of what’s going on.” The second explanation for the importance of the practitioner-athlete relationship was that it positively impacted athletes’ adherence and willingness to try recommendations made by the practitioner. Participant three suggested that this was particularly pertinent when the athlete was under pressure stating, “I think without a strong relationship... when an athlete is under pressure if they are being asked to do something from someone whom they don’t trust the likelihood of them doing that, however correct the request is, is quite small.”

Practitioners’ use of counselling principles and skills to develop and maintain practitioner-athlete relationships

This section comprises four categories; the *unreal relationship*, the *real relationship*, the *working alliance* and counselling skills. Each category was analysed in terms of 1) the importance of the counselling principle or skill to the development of practitioner-athlete relationships and 2) how it was applied/ considered by the participants. Owing to the wide

range of ways in which each counselling principle/skill was applied figure 2 is presented to provide descriptive information.

FIGURE 2

Working alliance. Although there was variation between the participants in the *working alliances* that they created with their athletes there was agreement that athletes should be actively involved in the process. Some of the participants emphasised two-way working relationships with their athletes, while others preferred to develop alliances that were driven by the athlete but fostered by the practitioner. Participant seven explained, “I’m almost like the farmer, I’ll plant the seed and tend to it and it’s up to them (the athlete) to grow ... it might take one session it might take a number of sessions.” Finally, some of the participants perceived that the nature of the *working alliance* depended on whether the athlete knew what they wanted and participant nine argued that it was based upon the practitioner being the expert. Participant five expressed that the development of a *working alliance* was important because it ensured that athletes would continue to implement psychological techniques when they were no longer working together. Participant 13 described the *working alliance* as, “Allowing us to work with our clients even when we’re having a bad day ... the *working alliance* is the agreement that we turn up and give our best regardless and so does the client.”

The participants reported using a range of methods and strategies to develop a *working alliance* on the goals, tasks and the bond that they shared. Many of the participants discussed the importance of reiterating to the athlete that the working relationship was professional and confidential. Participant 12 said, “I feel very strongly that if you don’t have a good relationship where the client feels comfortable, knowing and believing that everything he or she says will be kept confidential, I just think you can’t get anywhere.” Despite emphasising professional and confidential relationships, bonds where they were, “Friendly but not a friend” were also discussed by several participants. Finally, some participants

discussed the importance of being consistent, around and contactable. Participant eight explained, “If they’re (the athlete) going through something difficult ... I’ll arrange a time and I’ll say look I’m going to give you a call ... So even if I’m not seeing them daily I’m sort of there.”

Awareness of the *unreal relationship*. There was a lot of participant variation in their consideration of the *unreal relationship*. Some participants suggested that they did not consider the *unreal relationship* because its principles did not align to the theoretical framework (e.g., cognitive behavioural therapy; CBT) from which they practiced. Participant one partially considered it when providing psychological support for a sport which they had previously competed. Some participants discussed an awareness of the *unreal relationship* as being very important to the practitioner-athlete relationship as it enabled them to avoid being ‘sucked’ into relationships based on athlete transference, stopped them from assuming what their athletes were feeling and ensured that they provided the same support to all athletes. Additionally, participant 13 suggested that it stopped her from questioning her efficacy as a practitioner:

I worked with a footballer who was injured and he was very depressed and he was very angry. Now I used to, when he left those sessions, I used to feel pretty helpless...I believe that to have been his helplessness. What would have happened had I not been able to have worked that through? Well there would have perhaps been a sense of well actually I’m not very good at this.

Self-reflection on practice and in practice, personal supervision, and attendance on counselling courses were all discussed as means through which to raise practitioner awareness of the *unreal relationship*.

The real relationship. The *real relationship* comprises five subcategories: self-disclosure, empathy, warmth, congruence and holding the athlete in unconditional positive.

Self-disclosure. The participants reported using self-disclosure only when it was necessary. It was suggested that the use of practitioner self-disclosure could increase athletes' trust in the practitioner, break down barriers, demonstrate empathy, make the athlete feel more understood and less alone and encourage reciprocal disclosure. When using self-disclosure it was argued that it must be for the benefit of the athlete rather than the practitioner, be genuine, well-considered and relevant. Participant ten discussed the importance of taking care in disclosing about past amateur sporting experiences with elite athletes explaining, "My self-disclosure about sporting contexts, it's not really going to cut the mustard with most people and that's quite advantageous ... it means I'm more interested in their (the athlete) experience."

Empathy. Many of the participants emphasised the importance of being empathic with their athletes suggesting that it led to a breaking down of barriers, enhanced athlete disclosure and demonstrated connection and support. However, it was indicated that practitioner empathy needed to be genuine as athletes would sense if it was not sincere with participant 13 stating, "It's a necessary quality but if it's used as a pretence then I think it's very damaging because clients will know that you don't get them they will feel that." It was also emphasised that practitioners needed to make it clear to their athletes that they can never fully understand their experience with participant two stating, "I always say all you can try and do is approximate, closely approximate someone's experiences as close as you can, you can't live that life of that person, you can't say I understand you." The participants conveyed empathy through a variety of means including: paraphrasing, showing compassion, discussing similar experiences with the athlete, implicitly through their body language, and by being honest with the athlete that they could never possibly fully understand their experience.

395 ***Being genuine (congruent).*** Some of the participants discussed the importance of
396 being genuine with their athletes and being genuinely interested in them. It was explained
397 that being genuine enhances practitioner-athlete relationships because it allows athletes to see
398 the practitioner as a 'normal human' which leads to increased trust and honesty. The
399 participants indicated that they satisfied this facilitative condition by being themselves with
400 participant one stating, "It's not like you're just going in and acting like you're someone
401 you're not, it's not like going in a putting on a façade, you know suddenly I've got my
402 practitioner hat on. You know it's me." Additionally, participant ten suggested that
403 acknowledging that they did not have all the answers also showed that they were being
404 genuine, "If you can show a bit of vulnerability sometimes that can really enhance the
405 relationship." Finally, it was advised that it was important to be genuine while controlling
406 judgement.

407 ***Warmth.*** The importance of caring for their athletes and showing them was discussed
408 with suggestions that it provided a platform for the future work that they did with their
409 athletes. For example, participant ten stated, "I think it's a Roosevelt quote rather than a Ken
410 Ravizza quote but Ken Ravizza's taken it and run with it, 'that you've shown that you care
411 before they care what you know.'" Participant two showed his athletes that he cared for them
412 by listening saying, "though it might be a monetary transaction you do care ... people sense
413 that. You demonstrate by the nothing more grand than the listening and active listening
414 skills."

415 ***Unconditional positive regard.*** The participants varied in their use of unconditional
416 positive regard to develop practitioner-athlete relationships. Some of the participants felt that
417 the concept may sometimes be at odds with being genuine. Instead, a number of the
418 participants preferred to talk about the importance of being non-judgemental although this
419 was also sometimes deemed challenging. It was suggested by participant four that being

judgemental could act a barrier which would undermine the relationship. As such, she discussed how she ensured that she was not being judgemental, “You have to remain very conscious not to react in a personal way ... how you would in sort of in your non-professional life ... you have to think ... the word that you use and your body language.” Participant 11 further discussed the importance of not being judgemental at an elite level stating, “They’re being evaluated in everything that they do and I don’t want them to see that I’m another layer that they have too.”

Counselling skills. The participants employed counselling principles and skills independently of the three components of counselling relationships to develop relationships with their athletes. For example, there was some discussion around the importance of being comfortable with silence within the relationship. All of the participants reported that the use of active listening was central to the development of relationships. Participant ten discussed the importance of listening to emotional content stating, “Factual listening for sure, most people appreciate that, but emotional listening, I think people will take you to a different level in terms of building relationships.” Participant one went as far as to suggest that 80% of her work with an athlete could be listening. Finally, some of the participants mentioned the importance of being in a ‘good place’ themselves in the development of practitioner-athlete relationships. Participant three said, “At times it’s saying no I’m not able to see you (the athlete) now because I’m not in a position to be sufficiently psychologically robust to meet your demands.”

Challenges to the use of counselling principles and skills and relationship development

Although it was not a direct objective of the study, several challenges to the use of counselling principles and skills and the development of practitioner-athlete relationships were highlighted. The most commonly reported challenges pertained to the environment within which consultancy was done and also the goals of the team/club. Participant seven

stated, “A café has become my office with my cricketer which is interesting because he shuts up when people walk past.” Participant eight argued, “As much as I like to listen ... the world of sport doesn’t really allow you to do that for a long period of time and after a point there has to be some sort of visible change.” Additionally, emotional involvement with the team, sharing the athletes’ environment and whether the athlete had had any choice in seeing the practitioner were discussed as impacting the relationship.

Non-counselling strategies to develop and maintain practitioner athlete relationships

Although it was not a direct objective of the study to examine the participants’ use of non-counselling strategies (Figure 3) to develop practitioner-athlete relationships, they warrant reporting owing to their diversity. For the purpose of analysis the strategies were collated within the categories; behaviours and actions and content of discussions. Some of the participants reported using reflection in practice and on practice to aid the development of practitioner-athlete relationships. Participant five also discussed another strategy used, “If the kids are having a drinks break in their training, just going over and having a quick little chat ... it doesn’t have to be that you’re talking about football ... Just to start engaging with them and it’s a slow process.” Participant three talked about the importance of understanding hidden meanings and the culture in relationship development:

I got feedback from an athlete some years ago, one of the very first trips abroad with them, they were in the start area for something and they said could I just pass them, I think it was a bottle of water or some tape, ‘of course.’ I personally didn’t think anything of it. Fast forward a couple of year. They said had you not done that would have never spoken to you again.

FIGURE 3

Discussion

This study examined how practitioners who provide sport psychology support to athletes use counselling principles and skills to develop practitioner-athlete relationships. In accordance with recent research (Sharp & Hodge, 2011; Sharp et al., in press) all of the participants in this study emphasised the importance of the practitioner-athlete relationship. Findings indicated that practitioners believe that they cannot work effectively without sound practitioner-athlete relationships because they increase athletes' self-disclosure, and willingness to try and adhere to recommendations made by the practitioner. Both of these factors are linked to effective sport psychology consultancy. For example, sport psychologists require a holistic understanding of their athletes in order to best cater for their needs (Gardner & Moore, 2006; Petitpas et al., 1999). Additionally, the effectiveness of the psychological strategies recommended by sport psychologists are influenced by athletes' adherence to their practice and use (Shambrook & Bull, 1999). Given the importance placed on the practitioner-athlete relationship it was of little surprise to find that most of the participants had undertaken some form of development or training in counselling. Generally, the participants had positive perceptions of the role that counselling principles and skills play in the development of practitioner-athlete relationships. However, variation was found between the participants in their use of the three components of counsellor-client relationships (the *unreal relationship*, *real relationship* and working alliance) and counselling skills. Additionally, a number of sport-specific challenges to the formation of relationships and use of counselling principles and skills were discussed. Finally, the participants reported using a range of non-counselling strategies to foster the development of practitioner-athlete relationships.

In order to provide some context to the participants' use of counselling principles and skills to develop practitioner-athlete relationships, findings revealed that they varied considerably in their training and development in counselling and counselling skills. The

most commonly cited mode of training undertaken was a short-course in counselling which typically equipped the participants with understanding of a range of theoretical approaches and developed their basic counselling skills (e.g., active listening, questioning). The variation between the participants in their development and training in counselling was interesting in terms of comparisons that can be made with practitioners within the USA. In order to become a certificated consultant in the USA, trainees are required to undertake educational training and coursework in basic counselling skills (AASP, 2015). Although trainees within the UK have to demonstrate knowledge of counselling, attendance on a counselling course is not mandatory and can be fulfilled by engaging in relevant readings (as was the case by one of the participants; BPS, 2011). This is a concern given that practitioners acknowledge that interpersonal skills can be developed through practical experiences (Pope-Rhodus, 2000) and recognise that attendance on basic counselling courses can support this development (Cropley et al., 2007; Sharp & Hodge, 2011). The participants in this study argued that greater training in counselling skills should be provided to UK trainees (e.g., attendance on a short course in counselling should be mandatory).

The participants reported using a range of counselling principles and skills to develop practitioner-athlete relationships. Findings indicated that practitioners emphasise the development of *working alliances* where the athletes are actively involved in the process. This finding is supportive of recent research by Sharp and Hodge (2011; in press). In accordance Petitpas et al (1999) there were suggestions that the development of a *working alliance* between the practitioner and athlete could positively impact on athlete adherence to the practice and use of psychological techniques. Although *working alliances* are agreed between practitioners and clients (Hovarth et al., 2011), the participants provided insight into how they foster their side of the working relationship. More specifically, the participants discussed the importance of the bond that they shared with their athletes. Katz and Hemmings

(2009) previously argued that practitioners often neglect to agree the bond that they share with their athletes. However, the participants in this study emphasised the creation of safe, professional, purposeful and confidential bonds. Additionally, some of the participants mentioned the importance of being friendly but not a friend. Previous research has similarly found that sport psychologists nurture informal professional bonds with their athletes because they believe that they make athletes more at ease and thus more likely to disclose (Sharp & Hodge, 2011). The importance of being around and consistent, and following up on actions even if this was over the telephone after the consultancy session was also discussed, and presented a unique distinction between sport psychologists and counsellors in terms of how *working alliances* are formed. Counsellor-client relationships will often take place within agreed consulting sessions. However, in accordance with previous research with both athletes (Sharp et al., 2014) and sport psychologists (Sharp et al., in press) findings suggest that successful practitioner-athlete *working alliances* require the practitioner to ‘go beyond’ scheduled sessions and be contactable to their clients.

In relation to the development of a *real relationship* the participants varied in their use of self-disclosure although many used it when necessary to build practitioner-athlete rapport and reduce an athlete’s sense of isolation. In support of recommendations made by Petitpas et al. (1999) it was argued that self-disclosure should be well-considered and be for the benefit of the athlete rather than themselves. Additionally, there were reports that practitioner self-disclosure should be relevant and comparable to the athlete. Previous research indicates that sport psychologists sometimes discuss their past sporting experiences with their athletes to build relationships with them (Cropley et al., 2007; Sharp & Hodge, 2011). However, one participant within study (who had previously been an amateur athlete) suggested caution in this approach, particularly when working with elite athletes, arguing that this type of disclosure could direct interest away from the athlete. Additionally, it is unlikely that this

type of disclosure would be comparable to the elite athlete's experience. Research within counselling indicates that comparable practitioner self-disclosure is more likely to lead to reciprocal client disclosure (Henretty et al., 2014).

The participants were found to vary in their use of the facilitative conditions to develop *real relationships* with athletes. Some of the participants questioned holding their athletes in unconditional positive regard because it could be at odds with being genuine. This notion has previously been discussed within counselling (Irving & Dickson, 2006). Many of the participants emphasised the importance of being non-judgemental, demonstrating empathy and warmth and being genuine in the development of practitioner-athlete relationships. This is supportive of previous research which has found that both athletes (Anderson et al., 2004) and practitioners (Cropley et al., 2007; Pope-Rhodius., 2000; Sharp & Hodge, 2011) regard these characteristics as essential characteristics of sport psychologists. The participants used a range of strategies including active listening, paraphrasing and being open and honest to foster the facilitative conditions.

Although the facilitative conditions and self-disclosure have been emphasised to sport psychologists to develop *real relationships* it is important to acknowledge the role of the athlete in this process as *real relationships* unfold between two or more people (Gelso, 2009). Typically, the practitioner-athlete relationship within sport has been examined from either the practitioner's (Sharp & Hodge, 2011) or athlete's perspective (Sharp & Hodge, 2014) with little examination of the interaction between the two parties. Further research on the shared dynamic between the practitioner and athlete is required in order to provide greater insight into the workings of the relationship.

The *unreal relationship* was most divisive between the participants in terms of the role that it is believed to play in the development of practitioner-athlete relationships. Some of the participants did not consider it relevant to their practice because its psycho-analytical

origins did not align to the framework within which they practiced (often CBT). The importance of practicing in accordance with one or more theoretical frameworks has been emphasised within sport psychology (Poczwardowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004). However, this study provides evidence to suggest that practitioner-confinement to one theoretical approach may mean that they neglect other important aspects of the practitioner-athlete relationship e.g., practicing purely from a CBT perspective may mean that concepts such as transference and countertransference are not considered.

The participants that did acknowledge the *unreal relationship* reported that having an awareness of it ensured that all athletes were catered for equally and that it could stop them from: developing relationships based on athlete transference, assuming how their athletes were feeling and experiencing self-doubt. While one of the participants (who was also a qualified counsellor) used personal supervision to raise her awareness of countertransference other participants reported engaging in self-reflection (in-practice and on-practice) independently of a supervisor or counsellor. The role of reflective practice in the development of practitioner-athlete relationships has been discussed (Cropley, Hanton, Miles & Niven, 2010), although there is limited information on how it can be used to raise awareness of countertransference (Winstone & Gervis, 2006). It is possible that practitioners who provide sport psychology support rely on self-reflection as a means through which to raise awareness of countertransference because continued supervision is not mandatory for sport psychologists as it is for counsellors (BACP, 2015). Further research is needed to examine how practitioners use independent self-reflection to raise awareness of countertransference in order to ascertain whether this method is fit for purpose.

The participants reported using a range of counselling skills and principles to develop practitioner-athlete relationships independently of the three components of the counsellor-client relationships. Counselling skills are interpersonal skills which have emerged from the

counselling profession but can be used by other professionals (e.g. health professionals) to aid their work (Sanders, 2011). Counselling skills include: listening skills, reading body language, questioning, demonstrating understanding (Nelson-Jones, 1997). The participants within this study typically emphasised the importance of these skills in developing safe and secure relationships with their athletes. Additionally, some participants discussed the importance of being psychologically robust themselves to consult with their athletes. Whilst the personal well-being of the practitioner is acknowledged within counselling relationships (Rogers, 1957) less attention has been devoted to sport psychologists' wellbeing. This warrants consideration as a practitioner acknowledging that they are not able to see an athlete may be at odds with the need for them to be available and contactable outside of working hours.

Although this study indicated that practitioners deem practitioner-athlete relationships to be important and the use of counselling principles and skills to be necessary, a number of sport-specific challenges to their formation and use were identified. For example, some participants discussed how they were often required to work in a variety of settings (e.g., hotel lobbies while on tour, training pitches) which could sometimes blur boundaries and compromise the practitioner-athlete bond. Sharp and Hodge (2011) recently argued that working within informal settings could be beneficial in making athletes feel more at ease, however findings from this study suggest that sport psychology undertaken within public places can cause athletes to "close up." Additionally, there was evidence that practitioner-athlete relationships can be influenced by club/team goals. These challenges are unique to sport psychology and should be acknowledged by practitioners when building relationships with their athletes.

Although it was not a direct objective of the study all of the participants reported the use of non-counselling strategies (e.g., matching oneself to the athlete, knowing the culture

and sport and self-reflection) to develop of practitioner-athlete relationships. The range of strategies used may be reflective of the lack of literature available to practitioners on this aspect of practice and their experiential learning. However, it is important to acknowledge that the strategies used may also be a reflection of the unique demands placed on sport psychologists. For example, coaches have previously expressed that sport psychologists who are effective at building relationships with athletes and coaching staff have a sound knowledge of the team and sporting environment (Sharp et al., 2013). Finally, although reflective practice for raising awareness of countertransference has already been discussed it is important to acknowledge that several participants used it to develop their athlete-relationships more generally. Once again this finding supports the use of reflective practice as a form of professional development for relationship building.

Conclusion

Findings from this study indicate that practitioners who provide sport psychology support to athletes deem sound practitioner-athlete relationships to be central to their effectiveness. Despite there being a lack of research on the how to develop practitioner-athlete relationships, practitioners implement a range of counselling and non-counselling strategies to aid this aspect of practice. There is evidence to suggest that practitioners feel that further training on counselling skills would be beneficial in aiding the development of practitioner-athlete relationships. However, practitioners who provide sport psychology support to athletes face a number of challenges (e.g., the environment within which they practice and team/club goals) which may impact upon their ability to form relationships with their athletes and apply counselling skills.

Several practical implications emerged as a result of this study. Firstly, findings indicate that there should be more formalised training in counselling principles and skills for UK-based trainees. More specifically, training programmes should seek to develop trainees'

theoretical and practical understanding of *real* and *unreal* relationships, *working alliances* and counselling skills. However, sport psychologists should be consulted in the development of such training as it is important to acknowledge the unique sporting environments within which these principles and skills may be applied.

Although these findings address an under-researched aspect of practice this investigation had several limitations. Firstly, there was an under-representation of neophyte practitioners which may limit understanding of what training current trainees receive in counselling principles and skills. Secondly, it is important to acknowledge that the participants were based within the UK. Therefore, the transferability of the some of the findings (e.g., the participants' training in counselling principles and skills) to sport psychologists in other countries may be limited.

In spite of these limitations, several avenues for future research emerged from this project. Firstly, sport psychologists' competency in the use of counselling principles and skills should be examined. Moreover, there may be benefit in comparing practitioners who have undertaken counselling training with those who have not in their ability to form practitioner-athlete relationships to enable the importance of this aspect of practice to be quantified. Future research may also seek to explore athletes' perceptions of the importance of practitioners' use of counselling principles and skills in the development of practitioner-athlete relationships. Finally, there is a need to undertake a cross-sectional survey to quantify practitioners' training in and use of counselling skills.

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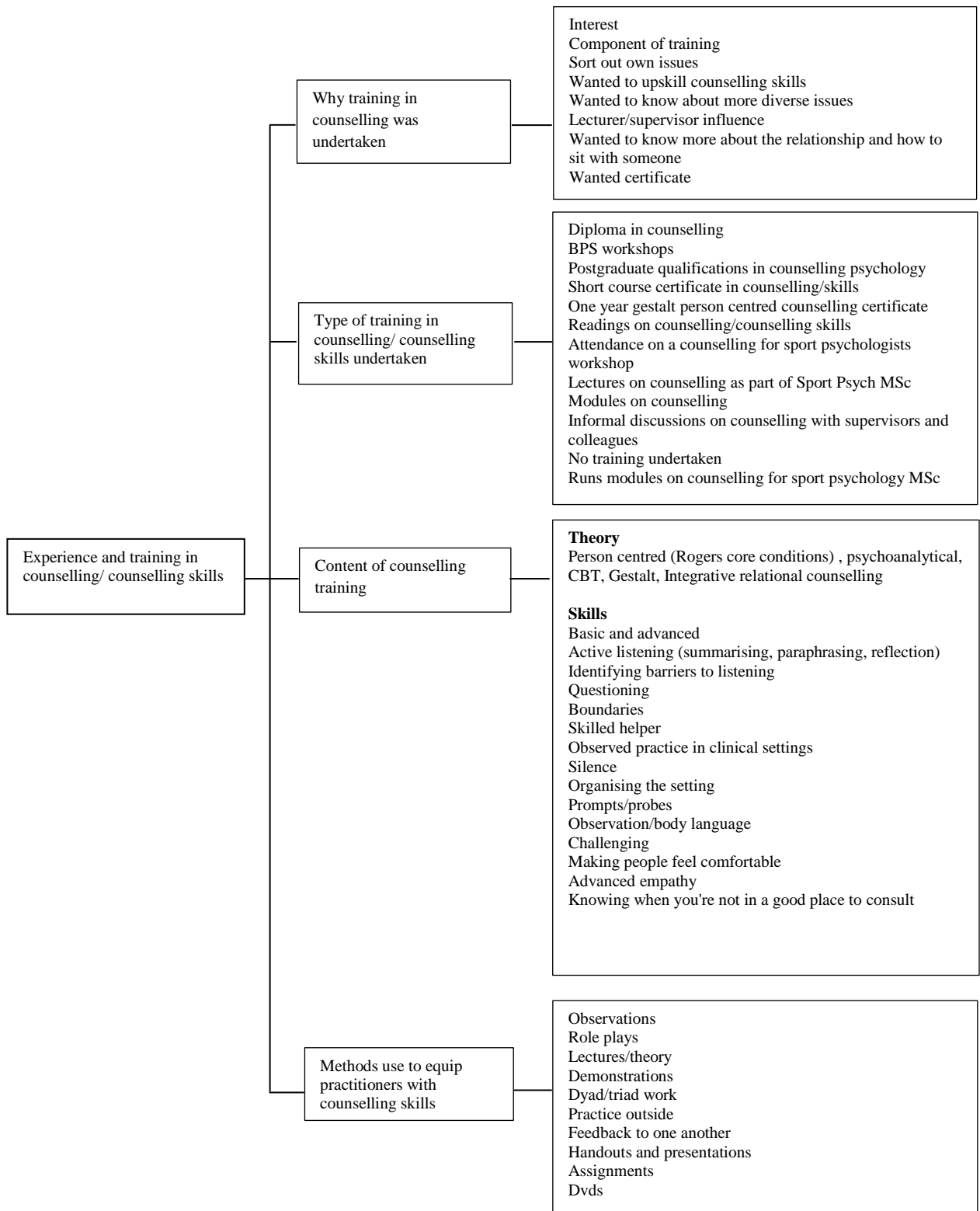


Figure 1. Practitioners' training in counselling/counselling skills.

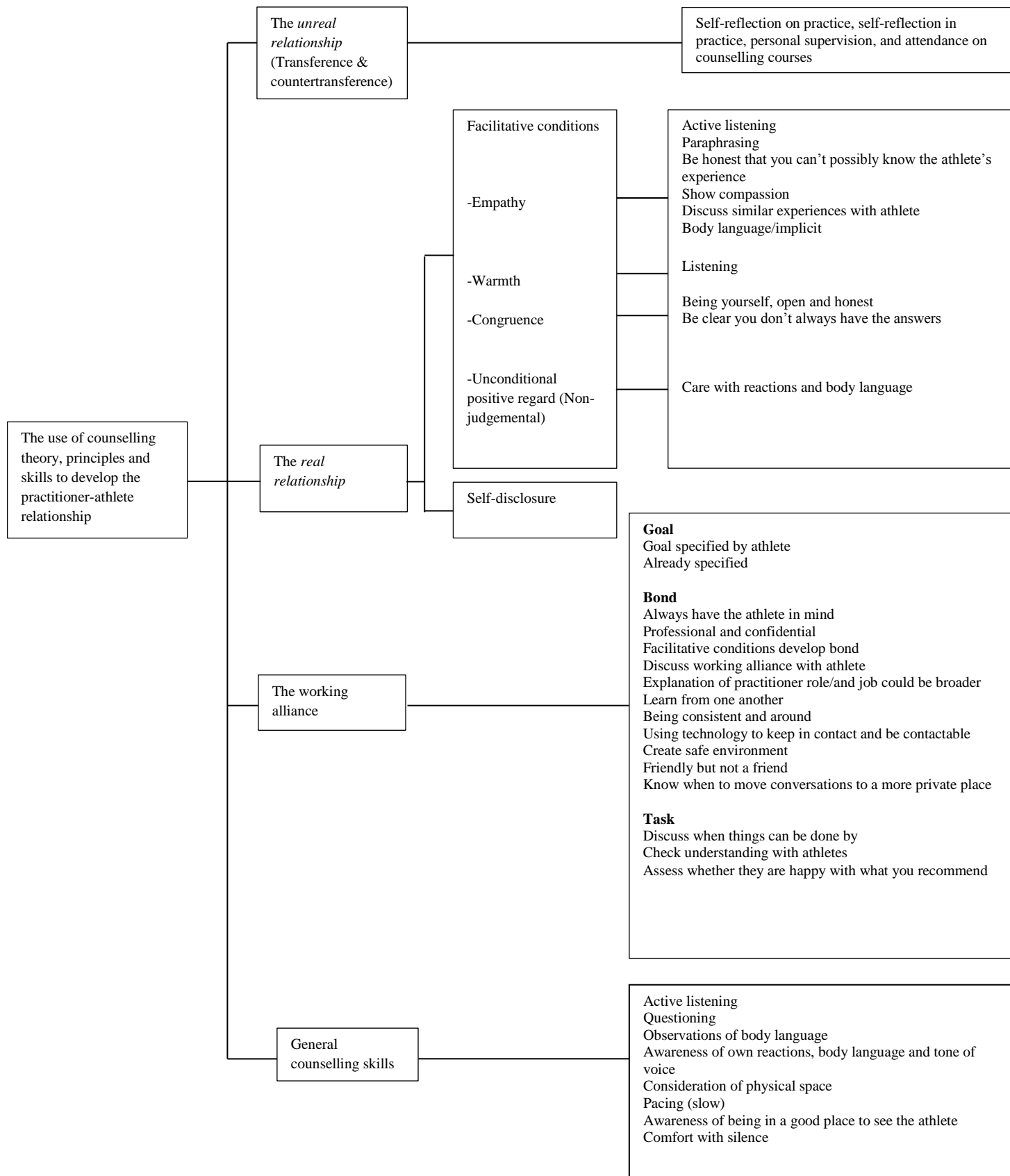


Figure 2. Practitioners' use of counselling principles and skills to develop practitioner-athlete relationships.

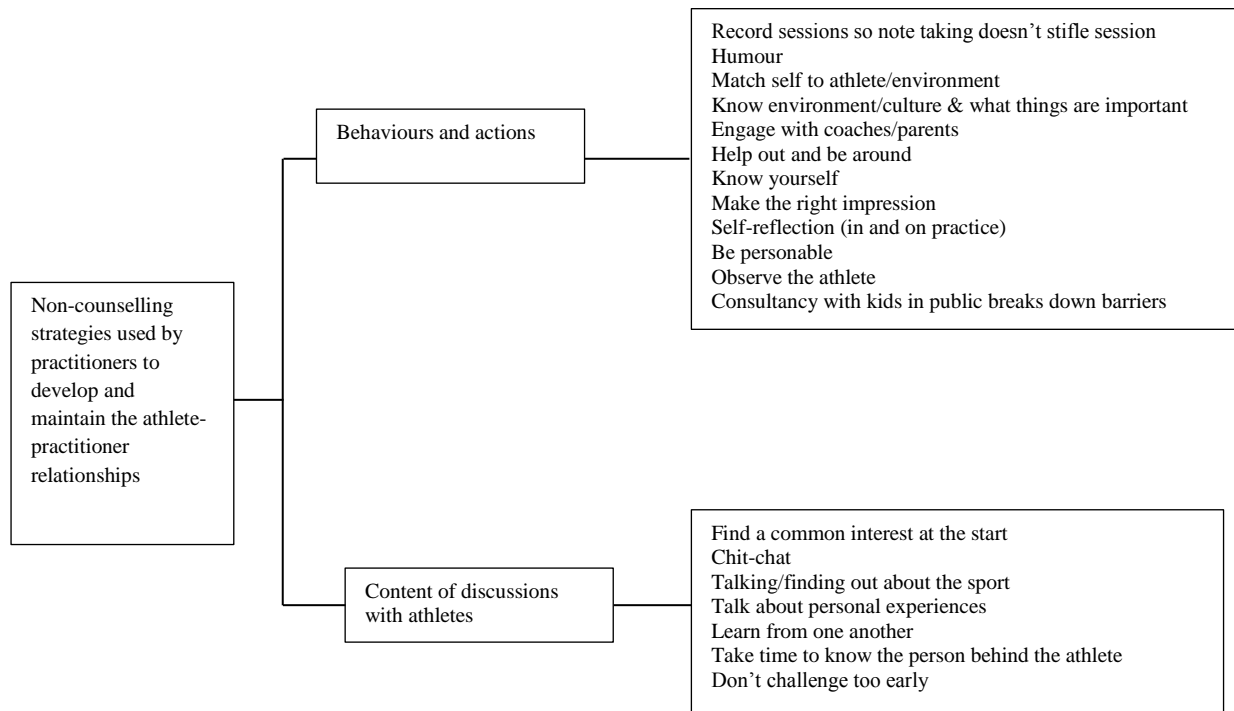


Figure 3. Practitioners' use of non-counselling strategies to develop practitioner-athlete relationships.